High School Counselor Access and Benefit: Do They Differ by Social Strata

Undergraduate Honors Research Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with Research Distinction in Sociology in the Undergraduate Colleges of The Ohio State University

By
Morgan Leopold

The Ohio State University
December 2020

Project Advisor/Committee Members:
Dr. Douglas Downey, Department of Sociology
Dr. Andrew Martin, Department of Sociology
Dr. Michael Betz, Department of Human Development and Family Science

Table of Contents

I: Abstract

Having contact with school counselors is known to have a positive effect on students' postsecondary paths (Bryan et al., 2011). However, it is unclear if all students have similar access to and enjoy similar benefit from contact with their high school counselors. Previous literature has shown that students who are White, higher SES, and girls may be advantaged when it comes to developing school counselor relationships and achieving desirable postsecondary goals. Using the *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002*, this study samples students, parents, and school administration (including school counselors) from 750 schools (22,500 students) across the United States in order to better understand social trends regarding the student-counselor relationship and its effect on educational attainment. The findings indicate that higher socioeconomic status is related to greater access to school counselors regarding postsecondary information. Along gender lines, girls, on average, had more access to counselors than boys. Racial trends were more complex and did not produce predictable outcomes related to counselor access; Asian students had the most access, and Native Americans had the least access, but the variations in all other racial groups made conclusions unclear. In terms of benefit, students of all groups enjoyed relatively equal benefit from visitations with their school counselors.

II: Introduction

In light of an increasingly prominent mental health crisis in the United States, high school counselors are receiving more attention and pressure than ever before regarding their role in students' academic success. "Almost all of the available evidence suggests a sharp rise in anxiety, depression, and mental health issues among Western youth" over the course of the last few decades (Twenge, 2011). Studies have been conducted within the educational field in order to predict school counselors' impact on student success rates, which is often measured by students' likelihood to achieve high test scores, apply and be admitted to colleges, and acquire desirable jobs after graduation. Such studies consistently find that school counselors have a significant impact on student success rates for students of all ages. However, there may be more to the story. I must still determine whether students of various races, classes, and genders receive equal access and benefit from relationships with their school counselors.

Little research has been conducted to explore the differential impact that counselors have on students' academic performances relative to the glaringly stratified educational structure. In order to begin answering this question, I explore associations between high school counseling and students' postsecondary outcomes across social class, race, and gender, since these are the three most popular foci in social sciences.

III: Background

Due to the systematic inequalities observed within them, schools have been a common site of criticism from scholars regarding patterns of social stratification in society. While some theorists suggest that schools reproduce and perpetuate inequality over several generations, others posit that schools equalize achievement and are simply surrounded by external forces that generate inequality. Both the critics of schools and their challengers agree that inequality exists in schools and that these inequalities lead to significantly different outcomes; the two differ, however, in where they identify the origins of these inequalities to be. In this thesis, I will assess the role of high school counselors in shaping inequality. Before discussing the research on high school counselors, however, I first provide a broader view of the debate within sociology regarding schools' roles in the stratification system. One side takes a critical view of schools, identifying a broad range of school characteristics and mechanisms that exacerbate inequality. The other side takes a more positive view of schools, arguing that they may even serve as a compensatory institution.

III-I: The Critical View of Schools

Beginning with the critical view of schools, this argument attests that certain school characteristics play the largest role in generating social inequality across social class, race, and gender. In the U.S., children experience dissimilar quality of schools as a result of their social backgrounds. Research from this vein determines that schools are the culprit by "[isolating] school effects…to statistically equalize children across measurable dimensions of family background, such as socioeconomic status, family structure, and race/ethnicity" (Downey & Condron, 2016). Note that according to this critical view of schools, the main factors that

contribute to social inequality are present within and limited to the current educational system. This viewpoint weighs the academic achievement gap heavily in predicting life outcomes of individuals and claims that a school's policies and employees play an ostensible role in where students end up.

One obvious school characteristic that is unevenly distributed across schools is teacher quality. Teacher quality and distribution are defined by a teacher's effectiveness and the success rate of the school in which the teacher is employed. Essentially, this view argues that certain schools maintain better quality teachers than others. The schools that host the best teachers are of upper socioeconomic status and tend to have a majority white demographic (Domina et al., 2017). Hanushek and Rivkin (2012) explain that in recent research, teacher quality has been determined more by the closeness of teacher-student relationships than categorical teacher characteristics.

The same trends can be seen with school funding such that more experienced and sought-after educators flock towards well-funded schools with ample educational resources. Kozol (2012) argues that, more often than not, schools are funded by property taxes in the United States, students districted to schools with more funding are wealthier. That being said, some have named residential segregation and districting as reasons for unequal education due to high concentrations of disadvantaged and minority students being found in lower quality, urban schools. Barsky et al. (2002) names this association the "Black-White Wealth Gap," explaining that white households are, on average, far more wealthy than black households; in this study; the median white household (in terms of wealth holding) has more wealth than any black household.

Some common explanations that theorists cite for schools generating inequality are how their rules, curriculums, and quality of teaching differ around the country. School policies,

learning environments, and standardized testing requirements – sometimes referred to as curriculum differentiation - have been targets for reparation for years, as shown by G.W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" act of 2001. Because schools enact highly variant policies and practices around the country, between states and counties, and sometimes even within counties, some schools are bound to be more effective than others. An important part of school practice is related to average classroom size in which some schools limit classrooms to 20 students, whereas others have upwards of 35 students assigned to a single teacher. Pedder (2006) suggests that small classes are crucial for a host of reasons: "individualization, quality of teaching, curriculum coverage, pupil attention, teacher management of pupils' behavior, time and space, teachers' and pupils' moral, and pupil-pupil relations, " and schools that enact small class sizes offer drastic advantages to their students in comparison to schools that do not.

The importance of access can be emphasized by Bryan et al.'s (2011) analogy to school counselors as "social capital," which is defined as "resources that flow through relationship ties." Depending on how many students are in schools and the quality of that school's administration, some students may have access to more social capital than others, and therefore, are more informed about how to accomplish their goals and receive invaluable resources. Social capital is addressed in more detail in the Access section of this paper.

In addition, some groups of students may be more likely to succeed academically than others due to discrimination within school interactions. Mickelson (2003) argues that schools have a role in solving educational inequalities because many of them arise from "actions of institutions…their attitudes and ideologies, or processes that systematically treat students from different racial/ethnic groups disparately or inequitably." Whether it be from teachers, school administrators, or even expectations from home, students of lower-income backgrounds,

minority races, and sometimes even genders are held to different expectations based on preexisting biases about how likely they are to succeed. An example of racial bias is that white teachers tend to rate black students' performances more harshly, on average, than do black teachers (Downey and Pribesh, 2004) Similarly, black students are *less* likely to apply to college after visiting their school counselors, according to Bryan et al. (2011). When underserved groups of students are not pushed to meet their full potential, inequalities form.

Continuing under the assumption that national inequality stems from unequal schooling practices across the country, potential solutions would justifiably begin inside these schools. For example, critics of schools may enact policies that equalize funding across schools. Also, Jeynes (2014) suggests that minorities, especially, find themselves on the lower end of the academic achievement gap due to intolerant cultural practices and learning styles utilized in American schools; therefore, adjusting the system to "demonstrate a greater degree of cultural sensitivity and awareness" as well as introducing multicultural scholarship (thus, eliminating discrimination) into curriculum may quench concerns about cultural capital and improve these disadvantaged students' chances for higher achievement. Additionally, school systems may be deconstructed from their current state to control segregated distribution of resources, both human and material, in order to equalize opportunities for academic success. Many solutions may be proposed at the school-level, and assuming the critical view of schools argument retains merit, many of these propositions are likely to make differences in terms of mending the current stratified state of American society.

III-I: The Compensatory View of Schools

Alternatively, some scholars argue that schools are "more part of the solution than part of the problem" of inequality (Entwisle & Alexander, 1992), and outside mechanisms are to blame for the academic achievement gap (i.e. parental involvement, socioeconomics, peripheral discrimination). This argument's most compelling points are that a) students on average only spend about 13% of their time inside the school's walls, and b) achievement gaps are almost entirely formed prior to children even beginning kindergarten (some say before the age of three). Downey (2020) explains that schools have only been a popular source of criticism regarding inequality because the popular narrative *wants* inequality to have an easy fix, since the alternative requires us to change the broader framework of our social system in order to resolve social inequalities. Americans highly value limited government and want to avoid blaming victims after the public backlash in response to the Moynihan Report. Also, because the education system is a female-dominated field, it is unconsciously more vulnerable to public criticism. All in all, those who find schools to be more redeeming than problematic view schools as "reflectors" of society's inequalities (Downey, 2020) instead of causes for them.

Research supporting this position is rarer because it tends to emphasize seasonal comparisons (which have heavy data requirements), but the findings are equally persuasive. Those who align with the compensatory view attest that, in general, researchers who argue that schools perpetuate inequality remain unconvincing because they only collect data during months in which schools are in session. In reality, if we desire a more comprehensive understanding, students should be studied both in and out of school, to observe how patterns change when they are exposed to schooling. When this strategy is taken, we find that students, both advantaged and disadvantaged, learn at the same rate when they are in school. The achievement gap increases the

most during the summer months when advantaged students experience enriching home environments and disadvantaged students do not (Downey et al., 2004). The most remarkable part is that once school resumes, the learning gap evens out again, providing evidence that schools work to equalize learning rather than worsen the achievement gap. This is not the say that students of various socioeconomic statuses are on the same playing field – they clearly are not. Rather, these studies show that gaps between students form in early childhood, and that once in school, advantaged and disadvantaged children learn at roughly similar rates. Socioeconomic-based achievement gaps would be larger if not for schools.

The compensatory view of schools has a different goal for policymaking and improvements: "Perhaps the biggest cost of [the critical view] is how it diverts our attention away from the root source of inequality—the uneven distribution of rewards in broader society" (Downey, 2020). Essentially, change will be most effective if policies target external causes of inequality instead of schools. Both Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg tried pouring money into failing urban schools, and not much changed as a result. The compensatory view would testify that urban schools actually rate so poorly compared to more advantaged counterparts *not* because schools are underperforming but because these urban families are far more likely to experience stress that leads to damaging learning environments for children. Therefore, had these billionaires targeted tax codes for better resource distribution or urban welfare (policies that would reduce stress among poor families), potentially a bigger difference would have been observed. As a whole, those who view schools as compensatory for social inequality urge scholars to only hold schools accountable for things they can control, since they are largely a reflection of a broader scope of inequality.

IV: High School Counselors and Inequality

This broader discussion of schools and inequality informs ideas about how high school counselors might matter. According to Belasco (2013), high school counselors play one of the most crucial and "indispensable" roles within the school system regarding students' paths post-graduation. They have often been referred to as "gatekeepers" because of how they can influence high school students' future plans. For this reason, counselors have been a popular focus of research in order to determine highly effective strategies to reduce social inequalities among racial, class, and gender strata. We may move forward with the supposition that if school counselors work to reduce inequality in student achievement, as is the underlying intention in their positions, then the compensatory view of schools may be supported. However, if school counselors are found to increase inequality among student achievement, then the critical view of schools may be more empirically sound. In order to determine the impact that school counselors have on students and their postsecondary outcomes, we must determine two things: (1) whether students of various social strata, namely socioeconomic status, race, and/or gender, are attaining equal or differential access, and (2) whether they enjoy similar benefit from contact with their school counselors regarding desirable post-secondary achievement.

IV-I: Access

When investigating how students are affected by their school counselors, access is of foremost interest and is measured by the frequency that students visit their counselors for information about post-secondary goals. Bryan et al. (2011) emphasizes the importance of access with the analogy to school counselors as "social capital," which is represented by students' availability of information, knowledge of norms, and social support based on their positions in

social networks. In this case, school counselors serve as vital social capital for many lower-income families since many parents in that strata did not attend college and therefore lack critical information and knowledge about college norms, thus making them unable to provide adequate social support for college-aspiring children. The same goes for high schoolers who aspire to jump into the workforce or military.

Having access to school counselors in general is half of the problem, but the other half is how often these meetings can occur. Some groups are able to meet with their counselors more than others based on that counselor's caseload size. According to Belasco (2013), the average counselor-to-student ratio is 1:457, whereas the most effective and realistic counselor-to-student caseload is 1:250 (Woods & Domina, 2014). Sattin-Bajaj et al.'s (2018) study found that only 22% of counselors had caseloads of less than 50 students, and 41% of counselors had caseloads over 300 students. In fact, studies have found that, on average, students spend approximately 38-minutes discussing their postsecondary plans with counselors each school year, bearing in mind that students whose counselors maintain higher than average caseloads allot even less time towards this topic - if any at all (Belasco, 2013). As a whole, counselors allot about 23% of their overall time to students' postsecondary education plans; the remainder of time is focused on students' emotional needs and administrative tasks (Belasco, 2013). Essentially, the larger a counselor's caseload, or the number of students assigned to that counselor, the less access students have to time and information that is crucial for postsecondary enrollment and achievement. There is a direct correlation between counselor caseload size, the frequency of meetings between counselors and students, and the percentage of students who anticipate college enrollment post-graduation.

Although accessing school counselors has shown consistently positive results, different strata of students experience various levels of counselor accessibility. Woods and Domina (2014) – who utilized the *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002* (ELS 2002) – searched for trends in whether students visited their counselors about postsecondary information during their sophomore years, senior years, or both years. The findings suggest that in terms of SES, "students who are already disadvantaged are concentrated in schools with larger counselor caseloads," and students who were of higher SES were concentrated in schools with smaller counselor caseloads. This means that lower SES students did not have as much access to counselors as higher SES students. Robinson and Roksa (2016) also utilized the ELS 2002 to analyze trends of counselor accessibility by socioeconomic status. Predictably, this study also found that lower SES students had access to less resources (for the purposes of this analysis, school counselors) than higher SES students since counselors were stretched thinner and were responsible for meeting with many more students. Bryan et al. (2009) also concluded that disadvantaged students have less access to school counseling. This study analyzed the relationship between access and socioeconomic status by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch at school. In schools where 0-30% of students were eligible, 83% saw their school counselors; where 31-50% were eligible, 76% saw their school counselors; where 51-100% of students were eligible, 80% saw their school counselors for postgraduation planning.

Racial patterns are complex in terms of access. In their study, Bryan et al. (2009) found that Black students saw their counselors the most out of any racial group, followed by White students, then Hispanic students. This study sampled 4,924 students, and 872 (18%) of those students did not receive any contact with their school counselors. In terms of race, Hispanic

students accessed their counselors the least with a percentage of 77% having ever contacted a school counselor. They are preceded by American Indians (79%) and Multiracial (81%). Interestingly, White students (81%) had less access to counselors in this study than Asian American (83%) and Black (84%) students. These findings are particularly surprising considering "White students tend to be concentrated in schools with the smallest caseloads, whereas Black and Latino students are concentrated in schools with larger caseloads" (Woods & Domina, 2014).

Girls access their school counselors more frequently than boys with all other factors held equal. Bryan et al. (2009) found that 21% of boys did not visit their school counselors, as opposed to 17% of girls. In Woods and Domina's (2014) study about counselor caseloads and access, boys were slightly less likely to visit their school counselors for postsecondary information than girls, but this difference decreased as caseload increased.

Based on these conclusions, the academic achievement gap and struggles experienced by certain students (particularly those from lower-income households) in achieving post-secondary goals appears to be correlated (at least in some cases) with insufficient access to school counselors who may offer essential guidance.

VI-II: Benefit

Do students from different social groups receive differential benefit from visiting their counselors? Access to counselors is only important if students actually derive benefit from their counselor-student relationships. Therefore, studies that compare whether different groups of students enjoy similar benefit from talking to a high school

counselor provide a more well-rounded picture regarding the role that high school counselors play in shaping inequality.

Existing research shows a direct positive correlation between school counselor involvement and high academic success rates for primary and secondary school students. According to Lapan et al. (2017), "frequency and helpfulness ratings each demonstrated incremental validity in explaining unique portions of the variance in student outcomes." In fact, meeting with their counselors was correlated with higher GPAs and more college admissions (Lapan, 2017). Of course, it is unclear if this correlation is causal, (discussed more in the Methods section) but it is at least consistent with the position that seeing a high school counselor improves students' outcomes.

There are reasons to believe that high school counselors vary in their effectiveness, and more effective counselors might be concentrated in schools serving high-SES and white students. Sattin-Bajaj et al. (2018) examines the effectiveness of three common approaches that high school counselors take when discussing students' postsecondary plans: procedural, generic, and directional. 19% of counselors are deemed procedural counselors, meaning they provide the most basic information and resist giving recommendations to students regarding their post-secondary plans. This type of counselor is far more likely to be found in low-income schools with disadvantaged students; the problem, of course, remains that disadvantaged students are less likely to know their options post-graduation and need additional direction. Generic counselors make up about 52% of counselors and are known to give slightly more detailed, but still general information to students and families in pursuit of rudimentary preparedness for college application processes and workforce arrangements. The prominence of generic counselors may be explained by the finding that counselors with above-recommended caseloads are more likely

to be generic and procedural than the third type. Directional counselors make up 28% of counselors and work with students individually to narrow down their options and actually provide guidance for success post-graduation.

Beyond caseloads, years of experience and training in the counseling field play large roles in the approaches that counselors take when working with students. Findings suggest that as counselor experience increased, the better their abilities to provide productive guidance were; that is, less than 30% of counselors had over 10 years of experience, and these counselors were far more likely to take directional approaches than less experienced counselors. Nearly 40% of counselors had between 1-4 years of experience, and 32% had 5-9 years of experience; these groups of counselors almost always fell into procedural and generic approaches when working with students on postsecondary planning (Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). Additionally, counselors struggle to receive sufficient training to provide quality and directional college and career readiness advice to students (Gilfillan, 2017).

Although there is reason to believe that high school counselors vary in their effectiveness, little is known about whether disadvantaged groups benefit less from contact with high school counselors than advantaged groups. Studies typically do not explore the differential benefit between students of various racial, socioeconomic, and gendered categories. Consequently, my study will contribute to the literature by directly testing whether the association between visiting a high school counselor and eventual educational achievement is similar among students from varying social groups.

VI-II-I: Social Class

The benefits that students derive from their counselor-student relationships may be dependent on social class, operationalized as socioeconomic status (i.e., a composite of household income, parents' education, and parents' occupational status). Although students of all socioeconomic backgrounds aspire to college as a postsecondary plan, lower SES students are far less likely to achieve that goal. Deslonde and Becerra's (2018) study discovered that around 87% of high school students report wanting to go to college, but only 52% of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds enroll; less than 10% of these enrollments end in obtaining a bachelor's degree. On the other hand, 82% of students from high socioeconomic backgrounds enroll post-secondary education, and over 50% obtain bachelor's degrees (Deslonde & Becerra, 2018).

Deslonde and Becerra (2018) discuss high school counselors' impact on low socioeconomic students' college enrollment as a "primary source" of college-related information, an idea with glaring similarities to Bryan et al.'s (2011) theory about "social capital," discussed previously. Because low-income parents are not able to devote as much time and knowledge towards their children's post-secondary efforts as higher-SES families, school counselors are largely responsible for the majority of lower-class students' academic goals and informational assistance. If this is the case, low-SES students may benefit more from visiting a high school counselor simply because they have more to gain.

Another possibility is that high SES students benefit more from school counseling than low SES students. This pattern could occur if high SES students have better quality counselors in their schools (i.e. directional counselors). This means that students from lower classes are likely to have procedural and generic counselors. For this reason, "Students in the three lower SES

quartiles (i.e., low SES, lower middle SES, and upper middle SES) were less likely to apply to two or more schools when compared with students in the high SES quartile" (Bryan et al., 2011.)

An additional explanation as to why lower-class students might receive less benefit from school counseling is due to biases that work against them. Although no research currently exists about counselor-to-student interactions (since these meetings are often kept confidential) disadvantaged students may be discouraged by counselors to pursue postsecondary routes like college due to the financial strains that come with it. Despite existing options to achieve postsecondary education, counselors may not present college as a viable option for students that come from lower class backgrounds.

VI-II-II: Race

There is reason to believe that race shapes the student-counselor interaction in ways that reproduce inequality. Some studies explore the relationship between students from various races visiting their school counselors concerning college information and their likelihood of enrollment in post-secondary education following these meetings. Evidence suggests that White students benefit more than any other race from meetings with their school counselors due to White-populated schools having a) higher quality counselors than minority-populated schools and b) more encouraging advice received by those counselors (Bryan et al., 2009).

White students are in higher average socioeconomic positions than any other race; high socioeconomic status is strongly correlated to smaller schools and more ideal counselor caseloads. Also, schools with high quality counselors have majority White student populations, meaning that White students receive more valuable information and guidance than do Black students in schools with less effective counselors (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). Schools with a demographic of Black and Hispanic students are far more likely to have procedural and generic

counselors, causing these races to go without essential guidance for postsecondary achievement (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018).

However, the counselors may not even realize they are underserving these minority student populations. Despite being the race most likely to initiate contact with their school counselors about college information, the more Black students saw their counselors, the *less* likely they were to apply to college; “Black students who did not see the counselor at all had significantly higher odds of applying to one school (vs. none) compared with those who saw the counselor after 10th grade” (Bryan et al., 2011).

I predict that school counselors who meet with African American students offer discouraging advice regarding college plans due to unconscious biases about their ability to perform well in higher education. Similar effects are shown with Hispanic students, who were more likely to apply to two or more schools when they did *not* see their school counselors (the more applications submitted, the more likely a student is to be admitted and enrolled) than students who saw their high school counselors for college information (Bryan et al., 2011).

Based on these findings, it seems school counselors must adjust their interactions with Black and Hispanic students specifically to be more “culturally responsive and inclusive of environmental and societal influences on students' college choices” (Bryan et al., 2009). Evidently, as demographic and representational factors evolve dramatically in America, “[students] will need guidance in this developmental process from counseling professionals whose expertise includes sensitivity to human diversity and the skills to help develop talents within the context of cultural realities” (Lee, 2001). Despite more promising numbers of school counselor-student relationships than in years past, current trends suggest that stigmatizing biases remain present within these interactions in which school counselor expectations of students have

major implications. An uneven power dynamic exists such that counselors hold superior knowledge about the college admissions process and certain groups of students require that information to be communicated more than others.

VI-II-III: Gender

Like social class and race, gender is affected by school counselor-student relationships regarding post-secondary paths. It is obligatory to note that studies have only referenced gender from a binary perspective with little to no distinction between sex and gender at this time. "[Girl] students were more like to apply to college than were [boy] students. [Girl] students had greater odds of applying to one school and two or more schools versus none" (Bryan et al., 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that girls are significantly more likely to visit their school counselors for college information than boys (Bryan et al., 2009). This difference is noted more heavily with students of minority races, as when looking at primarily White, high SES school populations, the gender difference in seeking college information was far less drastic (Bryan et al., 2009).

Even when girls and boys visit their school counselors the same amount, girls derive more benefit from these relationships (Valadez, 1998). Social expectations of peers and family members play one of the most influential roles in postsecondary aspirations. According to Valadez (1998), "[girls] are more likely to have peers who think it is important to go to college after high school. [Boys] and [girls] report no difference in the importance their peers place on getting jobs after high schools." However, peers are not the only ones that influence postsecondary goals. Socioeconomic status and school environment (i.e. school counseling) are strong influences of gendered college enrollment rates.

> For [boys] there are direct effects of SES as well as both positive and negative influences of educational experiences. SES and school experiences do not affect [girls] in the same way. SES has a significant effect in the reduced model, but the direct effects of SES and school experiences are suppressed in the full model for [girls]. What these findings suggest is that differences in resources between [boys] and [girls], along with differences in processes, help to explain why [girls] apply to college at much higher rates than [boys]. [Girls] have more resources, particularly in the educational and the parental- and peer-influence variables and are more effective than [boys] in converting these resources into the cultural capital needed by groups to persist in education (Valadez, 1998).

It should be noted that girls score higher than boys on average in both standardized English and Mathematics scores and have higher grades in both subjects, contributing to the accepted notion that girls are more suited for postsecondary educational paths (Valadez, 1998). Therefore, this may explain part or all of the trends we see regarding gendered benefit from counselors and likelihood to enroll in postsecondary education.

As a whole, preexisting research and literature about differential student access and benefit suggests that the counselor-student relationship has an impact on students' post-secondary outcomes. However, the patterns do not consistently support the view that high school counselor visits increase or reduce inequality. So, I explore that relationship in more detail.

V: Methods

V-I: Sample

The data comes from a preexisting database, the *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002* (ELS 2002), which is a "nationally-representative, longitudinal study of 10th graders in 2002 and 12th graders in 2004. The ELS 2002 uses a stratified sample design. Students [were] followed throughout secondary and postsecondary years" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The random sample is drawn from 750 schools (selected randomly out of 1,220 total eligible schools) across all 50 U.S. states from which 30 students were randomly selected for study. This

systematic sampling strategy intends to create a sample representative of various geographic regions, races, classes, socioeconomic statuses, genders, etc. The sample consists of multiple elements: students, parents, teachers (math and English), and school administrators - including school counselors. The 22,500 surveyed students serve as the unit of analysis. I analyze the 16,197 students who gave valid responses to the question about whether they have visited a counselor sophomore year.

V-II: Measures

The primary dependent variable is the frequency that students visit their school counselors. This data is derived from the ELS questionnaire from both sophomore and senior year follow-ups: "Where have you gone for information about the entrance requirements of various colleges?" Students must have selected "guidance counselor" as a resource in order to be counted.

In addition to predicting whether students visit a high school counselor, I am also interested in the degree to which these visits benefit the student. For this reason, I also predict students' postsecondary achievement eight years after high school graduation. I want to learn how much students achieve following high school graduation and how much of this achievement can be attributed to visits with school counselors. In the ELS dataset, this variable is coded with four distinct possibilities: 1) no postsecondary attendance; 2) some college or enrolled at less than four-year institution; 3) graduated from a four-year institution; and 4) enrolled in post-baccalaureate program.

Race of individuals in the sample is determined by self-reported answers in the questionnaire. They can claim their race to be a) White, b) Black, c) Hispanic, d) Asian, e)

Native American, or d) Biracial. (Note: although "Hispanic" race is not recognized on the census, I chose to include it in this study to remain consistent with previous literature). See Table 1 for descriptive information about the racial demographic of the sample.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is determined by a composite of family income (from employment), prestige score of parental occupation, and parent's highest level of completed education. SES was divided into four quartiles to represent a) lowest class, b) lower-middle class, c) upper-middle class, and d) highest class. See Table 1 for descriptive information about the socioeconomic spread of the sample.

Gender was coded into two distinct categories based on student self-identification in surveys. As noted above, surveys did not account for non-binary gender identification (I assumed that these students fall into the non-response category) and use concepts of gender and sex interchangeably despite modern acknowledgment of their conceptual distinctions. This is a clear shortcoming of the dataset. See Table 1 for descriptive information about the sex/gender division of the sample.

Grades were assessed by students' cumulative grade-point averages (GPA) across grades 9 through 12. GPAs were measured on an unweighted 4-point scale and were split into four quartiles: the lowest quartile represented GPAs of 0.0 to 1.0 and consisted of 2% of students; the middle-low quartile represented GPAs of 1.1 to 2.0 and consisted of 17% of students; the middle-high quartile represented GPAs of 2.1 to 3.0 and consisted of 41% of students; the highest quartile represented GPAs of 3.1 to 4.0 and consisted of 40 % of students. This variable was controlled for in the regression because students with higher GPAs may be more likely to consider postsecondary education, visit their school counselors, or attend a 4-year institution than students with low GPAs.

Test scores were already split within the dataset into quartiles. A composite of the students' reading and math test scores placed them in the lowest quartile, middle-low quartile, middle-high quartile, or highest quartile. This variable was controlled for in the regression because students with high test scores may be more likely to consider postsecondary education, visit their school counselors, or attend a 4-year institution than students with low test scores.

V-III: Analytic Strategy and Hypotheses

The formal research question that this study attempts to answer is: *Do students from various social backgrounds (SES, race, gender) receive equal access and benefit to high school counselors regarding post-secondary paths?* My hypothesis is consistent with the findings of previous research as I predict that school counselor access and benefit will be unequal for students based on social stratification factors. More specifically, I hypothesize that students from upper socioeconomic backgrounds will achieve significantly more access to and benefit from their school counselors than lower socioeconomic students. In terms of race, I hypothesize that white students receive more access and better benefits from their school counselors than students of minority races. Although previous studies suggest significant disparity in school counselor access and benefit across gender, I predict that these gender differences will be minimal due to how gender variations are often dominated by class and racial inequalities. So, the disparity of benefit gained from counselors between boys and girls will not be considerable when isolated from class and race.

To address this study's first question (Do students from different demographic groups have equal access to high school counselors?) I begin by documenting the percentage of students who visited a high school counselor sophomore and senior years of high school across social

strata/subgroups. Then, I use t-tests to assess whether observed differences are statistically significant.

To test my second question (Do students from different demographic groups enjoy differential benefit from visiting high school counselors?), I predict how far students have gone in school 8 years after graduating high school (2012). In this analysis, my sample size drops to 13,250 because I am limited to analyzing those students who remained in the survey 8 years after high school graduation.

I estimate a hierarchical Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression with educational attainment regressed on counselor visits in the first model. Then, I add demographic information (students' sex, race, SES) in model 2. Because some advantaged students (e.g., high-SES students) might also be higher performing students to begin with, I control for students' high school grades and test scores in model 3. Finally, I include a series of interaction variables for each demographic condition by school counselor visits (e.g., SES x visiting a high school counselor) to assess whether these visits benefitted some groups more than others.

Results

VI-I: Access

Students of different genders and socioeconomic statuses have differential access to their high school counselors (see Table 2). In this table, I conducted t-tests between girls/boys, all SES quartiles versus the bottom quartile, and all racial/ethnic groups versus the dominant group (Whites). On average, girls (47%) visited their counselors more than boys (42%) in their sophomore years, senior years (83%, 78%), and sophomore and senior years combined (25%, 20%). Moreover, high SES students (47%) were more likely to visit school counselors in sophomore year than low SES students (42%). The same relationship was found during senior

year (83%, 77%), and sophomore and senior years combined (29%, 15%). Low SES students were least likely to visit their school counselors throughout high school. My hypotheses that girls and high SES students have more access to counselors than their counterparts is supported. All of these comparisons were statistically significant.

Racial trends are more difficult to interpret. During sophomore year, Asian students (50%) were most likely to visit their counselors by a large margin. This group was followed by Biracial students (48%), then White (44%) and Black (44%), Hispanic (43%), then Native American (34%) students. In senior year, Asian students (82%) were still most likely to visit their counselors but only by a small margin; White (81%) and Black (81%) students followed closely behind, then Biracial (78%), Hispanic (77%), and Native American (73%) students. Asians (27%) were most likely of all racial categories to visit their counselors both years, and Native Americans (12%) were least likely to visit their counselors throughout high school. However, these trends do not match expected outcomes as previous literature would predict that White students have consistently more access to counselors than any other racial category. My hypothesis that White students have the most access to counselors is rejected.

VI-II: Benefit

While the data shows that seeing high school counselors has benefits for students, that benefit is not different based on gender and racial groups. In Table 3, I predicted students' educational attainment with a series of interactions between social groups and high school counselor visits (model 4). The interaction between gender and educational attainment did not reach statistical significance, so boys and girls benefit equally from school counselor visits.

Similarly, none of the interactions between various races and educational attainment reached statistical significance, indicating that all races enjoy equal benefit from visiting their school counselors. Therefore, my hypothesis that girls and White students enjoy the most benefit from their school counselor interactions is rejected.

My first thought was that these trends of equalized benefit resulted from controlling for grades and test scores among students; however, when I ran the regression without controlling for these variables, the results were unchanged. The justification that I think to be most explanatory is that quality of counselors between schools of various racial demographics is not as disparate as I originally supposed. As for gender, the interactions between school counselors and different genders of students are relatively similar.

As for socioeconomic status, the interaction term between SES and educational attainment was statistically significant by a small margin, meaning that high SES students benefit slightly more from visits with their school counselors than low SES students. This trend is likely explained by disparate school counselor quality among schools of different socioeconomic demographics. That is, schools with high concentrations of low SES students are more likely to have ineffective counselors (i.e. generic and procedural), while high SES students are more likely to have effective counselors (i.e. directive) at their disposal (Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). My hypothesis that students of higher socioeconomic statuses enjoy greater benefit from school counselor interactions is accepted.

Limitations

One limitation is that the study assumes that a positive postsecondary outcome must be college attendance. Originally, I wished to test whether students achieved their desired postsecondary outcomes, whether they be college enrollment, career obtainment, military, or

other. However, even though the ELS dataset included a variable about students' desired postsecondary paths, it did not include a variable that told where students ended up besides college institution enrollment. As a result, I was forced to focus solely on educational attainment as a measure of postsecondary achievement and school counselor benefit.

In addition, my models assume that I am successfully isolating the effect of high school visits on educational attainment. There are likely many differences between the kinds of students who visit high school counselors and those that do not that are not statistically controlled in my models. For example, the kinds of students who visit a high school counselor may, in general, be more planful than the students who do not. This same characteristic, rather than their meetings with a counselor, may explain why they attain greater levels of educational attainment. The associations I observe between high school counselor visits and educational attainment may reflect these unmeasured characteristics rather than a causal relationship.

Another limitation from the study is related to a lack of distinction between sex and gender in the dataset. The sex variable within the dataset did not allow for testing of nonbinary gender identities with respect to school counselor relationships. Because I was interested in learning about gender, I was forced to treat the concepts of sex and gender as one, despite their conceptual distinctions.

Discussion

This study concludes that students of different socioeconomic backgrounds have disparate access to school counselors; high SES students have greater access than low SES students. Previous literature found similar trends, citing counselor caseloads as a major source for this inequality. I can reasonably assume that I found a similar pattern here because counselor

caseloads are lower in schools with majority high SES students, whereas counselor caseloads are generally higher in schools with a high concentration of low SES students. The finding that low SES students have less access to counselors is consistent with the critical view of schools, which posits that schools are at least partially responsible for generating social inequality. Of course, this conclusion is based under the assumption that all students view college enrollment as a desirable postsecondary outcome. It may be true that low SES students do not aspire to college and prefer to enter directly into the workforce after high school, in which case, these trends may be more reflective of students' varying goals rather than insufficient access to counseling.

The findings about gender are also consistent with previous literature—girls have more access to their school counselors, on average, than boys. The reason for this trend is less transparent, but I suspect that girls visit their counselors more due to personal attributes and an earlier motivation to learn about postsecondary information. Bryan et al. (2009) reported that girls are more interested in peer approval than boys, so it is quite possible that they choose to visit counselors for affirmation of goals and college planning. Nonetheless, girls graduate high school more often than boys, on average, despite fewer resources and inferior status in society. So, the fact that they visit their school counselors more than boys suggests that schools are serving as a source of gender equalization, thus supporting the compensatory view of schools.

The racial patterns found in the study function similarly to gender, such that different racial groups do not have equal access to school counselors. The patterns of access are not consistent with previous research (which found that white students had the most access) since I found Asian students to have the most access. Also, the fact that Hispanic students have less access to counseling than White students supports the critical view of schools. Again, student autonomy may be a factor in these trends; it is possible that Asians often strive for college

enrollment, Hispanic students do not view college as a desirable postsecondary outcome and prefer to enter directly into the workforce or military. If that is the case, this is more of a difference in goals rather than counselor access. A more interesting discovery is that White and Black students actually experience relatively equal access to school counselors. While the complete explanation for this trend is unknown, it may be that counselors' caseload sizes in schools with high concentrations of White students and high concentrations of Black students is not as disparate as previous studies suggested. No matter the reason, the idea that White and Black students have equal access to counseling supports the compensatory view of schools.

In terms of benefit, students of different genders and racial categories appear to benefit equally from meetings with their school counselors about postsecondary information. A possible explanation is that girls and boys may have relatively similar postsecondary goals and interactions with their school counselors. Correspondingly, a conceivable reason for equalized benefit between racial strata is that the quality of counselors in schools with a majority of White students and a majority of minority students is not as different as previous studies suggested. Perhaps the quality of counselors distributed itself more evenly across schools since the time period that the critical studies were conducted, having been published nearly a decade ago. The finding that all students of different genders and races benefit equally suggests that schools are neutral since counselors do not necessarily generate or compensate for inequality within their meetings; they assist students of different genders and races equally en route to achieving their desired postsecondary outcomes.

Benefit gained from visiting with a school counselor varies by socioeconomic status. More specifically, higher SES students benefit slightly more than lower SES students from relationships with school counselors. This is most likely due to unequal distribution of high-

quality counselors between schools. The most effective school counselors are generally found in schools with high concentrations of high SES students, while ineffective counselors are most likely to be located in schools with low SES student populations. This finding supports the critical view of schools such that school counselors may perpetuate class inequality based on the imbalanced benefit that students receive from these interactions.

Some may question why counselor quality appears to have an effect on socioeconomic status but not race, and I cannot answer that with complete certainty. I predict that the association between racial minority status and low SES is not as strong as it was historically. This means that racial minorities may be more likely to fall into higher SES categories and be located in schools with higher quality counselors than previous literature suggested.

Referring back to the debate about the education system's role in generating or resolving social inequality, this study provides both support for and arguments against each side. School counselors may contribute to inequality due to unequal access and benefit among various socioeconomic groups, but the fact that they benefit both genders and all races similarly is a claim for schools' as a neutral institution. Despite contradictory evidence, both of these results may be useful in future educational reform, policy proposals, and systematic improvement. For example, the study suggests that reforming counselor access – more specifically, reducing counselor caseload sizes in disadvantaged areas to reach ideal limits – may have positive outcomes on both educational effectiveness and inequality. On the other hand, the study also promotes continuation of reform efforts beyond the school's walls to resolve remaining causes of inequality, whatever they may be.

References

Barsky, R., Bound, J., Charles, K. K., & Lupton, J. P. (2002). Accounting for the Black–White Wealth Gap, Journal of the American Statistical Association, 97:459, 663-673, DOI: 10.1198/016214502388618401

Belasco, Andrew S. (2013). "Creating College Opportunity: School Counselors and Their Influence on Postsecondary Enrollment." Research in Higher Education 54:781–804.

Bryan, J., Holcomb-McCoy, C., Moore-Thomas, C., & Day-Vines, N. L. (2009). Who sees the school counselor for college information? A national study. *Professional School Counseling*, *12*(4), 2156759X0901200401.

Bryan, J., Moore-Thomas, C., Day-Vines, N. L. , & Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2011). School counselors as social capital: The effects of high school college counseling on college application rates. Journal of Counseling & Development, 89, 190–199.

Deslonde, Vernell L. & Becerra, Michael D. (2018). High School Counselors' Influence on Low Socioeconomic Students' College Enrollment. *Journal of School Counseling*, *16*(24), 24.

Domina, T., Penner, A., & Penner, E. (2017). Categorical inequality: Schools as sorting machines. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *43*, 311-330.

Downey, D. B. (2020). *How Schools Really Matter: Why Our Assumption about Schools and Inequality Is Mostly Wrong*. University of Chicago Press.

Downey, D. B., & Condron, D. J. (2016). Fifty years since the Coleman Report: Rethinking the relationship between schools and inequality. *Sociology of Education*, *89*(3), 207-220.

Downey, D. B., & Pribesh, S. (2004). When race matters: Teachers' evaluations of students' classroom behavior. *Sociology of Education*, *77*(4), 267-282.

Downey, D. B., Von Hippel, P. T., & Broh, B. A. (2004). Are schools the great equalizer?

Cognitive inequality during the summer months and the school year. *American Sociological Review*, *69*(5), 613-635.

Entwisle, Doris R. and Karl L. Alexander. (1992). "Summer Setback: Race, Poverty, School Composition, and Mathematics Achievement in the First Two Years of School." *American Sociological Review* 57(1):72–84.

Gilfillan, B. H. (2017). School counselors and college readiness counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, *21*(1), 2156759X18784297.

Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2012). The distribution of teacher quality and implications for policy. *Annu. Rev. Econ.*, *4*(1), 131-157.

Ingels, S.J., Pratt, D.J., Rogers, J.E., Siegel, P.H., and Stutts, E.S. (2005). *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002: Base-Year to First Follow-up Data File Documentation* (NCES 2006–344). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Jeynes, W. H. (2015). A meta-analysis on the factors that best reduce the achievement gap. *Education and Urban Society*, *47*(5), 523-554.

Kozol, J. (2012). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. Broadway Books.

Lapan, R. T., Poynton, T., Marcotte, A., Marland, J., & Milam, C. M. (2017). College and career readiness counseling support scales. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *95*(1), 77-86.

Lee, C. C. (2001). Culturally responsive school counselors and programs: Addressing the needs of all students. *Professional School Counseling*, *4*(4), 257.

Mickelson, R. A. (2003). When Are Racial Disparities in Education the Result of Racial Discrimination? A Social Science Perspective. *Teachers College Record, 105*(6), 1052–1086. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9620.00277

Pedder, D. (2006). Are small classes better? Understanding relationships between class size, classroom processes and pupils' learning. *Oxford Review of Education*, *32*(02), 213-234.

Robinson, K. J., & Roksa, J. (2016). Counselors, information, and high school college-going culture: Inequalities in the college application process. *Research in Higher Education*, *57*(7), 845-868.

Sattin-Bajaj, C., Jennings, J., Corcoran, S. P., Baker-Smith, C., Hailey, C. (2018) Surviving at the street-level: How counselors' implementation of school choice policy shapes students' high school destinations. Sociology of Education, 91(1), 46-71.

Twenge, J. M. (2011). Generational differences in mental health: Are children and adolescents suffering more, or less? *American journal of orthopsychiatry*, *81*(4), 469.

Valadez, J. R. (1998). Applying to college: Race, class, and gender differences. *Professional School Counseling*, *1*(5), 14-20.

Woods, C. S., & Domina, T. (2014). The school counselor caseload and the high school-to-college pipeline. *Teachers College Record*, *116*(10), 1-30.

Table 1. Descriptives of all variables, Education Longitudinal Study, 2002.

	Description	Metric	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Sample size (n)
Saw counselor sophomore year	"Where have you gone for information about the entrance requirements of various colleges?"	0=did not visit HS counselor, 1=did visit a HS counselor	0.446 (0.004)	12,514
Saw counselor senior year			0.803 (0.004)	9,702
Saw counselor both years			0.214 (0.410)	16,197
Male	"What is your sex?"	0=male 1=female	0.502 (0.004)	15,370
Female				
White	"Please select one or more of the following choices to best describe your race. Mark all that apply." "Are you Hispanic or Latino/Latina?"	0=Not White 1=White	0.569 (0.004)	15,244
Black		0=Not Black 1=Black	0.133 (0.003)	
Hispanic		0=Not Hispanic 1=Hispanic	0.145 (0.003)	
Asian		0=Not Asian 1=Asian	0.096 (0.002)	
Native American		0=Not Native American 1=Native American	0.009 (0.001)	
Bi-Racial		0=Not biracial 1=Biracial	0.048 (0.002)	
SES quartile 1	"the average of 3 inputs (…earnings from employment, the prestige score associated with the respondent's (parent's) current/most recent job, and educational attainment)"	1=Lowest quartile 2=Low-middle quartile 3=High-middle quartile 4=Highest quartile	2.572 (0.009)	15,244
SES quartile 2				
SES quartile 3				
SES quartile 4				
Test scores	"Standardized composite test quartile"	1=Lowest quartile 2=Low-middle quartile 3=High-middle quartile 4=Highest quartile	2.566 (1.106)	15,892
Grades	"GPA for all courses taken 9^{th} – 12^{th} grades - categorical"	1=Lowest quartile 2=Low-middle quartile 3=High-middle quartile 4=Highest quartile	3.185 (0.784)	14,796

Educational Attainment	Composite of several questions about postsecondary attainment as of the third follow-up interview.	1=no PS attendance 2=some college or enrolled at less than four-year institution 3=graduated from a four-year institution 4=enrolled in post-baccalaureate program.	1.342 (0.816)	13,250

Table 2. Percentage of students who saw a High School Counselor for college entrance information, Education Longitudinal Study, 2002.

	Sophomore Year	Senior Year	Both Years	N (after F1)
Male	42*	78*	20*	7653
Female	47	83	25	7717
White	44	81	24	8682
Black	44	81	19*	2020
Hispanic	43	77*	18*	2217
Asian	50	82	27	1460
Native American	34*	73*	12*	130
Bi-Racial	48	78	23	735
SES quartile 1	42*	77*	15*	3608
SES quartile 2	45	80	21*	3604
SES quartile 3	45	80	24	3731
SES quartile 4	47	83	29	4301

* = p < .05

** = p < .01

*** = p < .001

Table 3. OLS Regression Coefficients for Educational Attainment Regressed on Visit with HS Counselor Senior Year, Control Variables and Interactions. Education Longitudinal Study (2004)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Access to school counselor senior year	0.023***	0.188***	0.115***	0.225**
Male		-0.136***	-0.076**	-0.110*
SES		0.239***	0.148***	0.183***
Black		-0.119**	0.148**	0.202**
Native American		-0.211*	-0.023	-0.029
Asian		0.213***	0.192***	0.203**
Hispanic		-0.114**	0.059*	0.128*
Biracial		-0.119*	-0.047	-0.167*
Test scores			0.165***	0.165***
Grades			0.328***	0.327***
Access*Male				0.042
Access*SES				-0.044*
Access*Black race				-0.066
Access*Native American				0.020
Access*Asian				-0.012
Access*Hispanic				-0.084
Access*Biracial				0.149
Sample size (n)	7,950	7,950	7,950	7,950

*I also estimated interactions with access during sophomore and access to counselors in both sophomore and senior years, both of which produced the same results.

* = p < .05

** = p < .01

*** = p < .001